Hey Hey Lonesome

a novella

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Punch Drunk Press

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Last night before bed I made a list. Looking at it now — this morning — it reads as follows:

1) Eat a big, healthy breakfast.

2) Get to work early.

3) Buy crystal meth with Tyler and see if Curt has any weed.

4) Smoke a bunch of crystal then go to the party.

Lists are how I hold it together. If I can't set a structure for my day I'm worthless. I make lists of what to do at work (because I'm scared I'll forget in the middle of a shift.) I make lists of things to say to people I'm nervous around and lists of ways to get rich or feel less lonely. Diagrams. Rules. Charts and resolutions. This is my confession: My name is Joey Carr; I used to be tough as shit but now I'm having a harder and harder time holding it together.

When I woke up I left my aunt's house early and walked down to the beach to get breakfast at the pier. Like always I ordered a can of Dr. Pepper, an avocado sandwich, and a side of sourdough toast. On the walls, gaudy airbrushed surfboards as decoration. Dim lights. Ceiling fans moving slow. Sun in blocks of pure light at the windows. The TV above the bar was on but the volume was off — a sitcom, subtitled. And now an hour later my food is gone and I'm slumped over my plate watching the sports recap — the Chargers, a crowd shot — men, adults, fans, a bunch of dads and uncles screaming at the camera, giving wild thumbs-up, highfiving, doing bodybuilder poses, wrestler poses, beating on bare chests like apes,

their bodies painted blue and yellow. "Can I get the check?" I say this sleepwalking, dreaming without the dream, moving through the day like a shit floating in water. And then it's on my table with a red and white peppermint and a clear plastic BiC pen to sign. On the check the waitress has written "THNX xoxo RUBY," a smiley face drawn under the words with insane-looking hair scribbled around it. I pay up and walk out into the sun and stand on the cement, squinting up at the ceiling of sky and space around me, heat rising off the blacktop, wrinkling the air as it moves from the earth. My name is Joey Carr and I used to be sure of my potential but now I'm having a harder and harder time tricking myself.

I imagine falling from the sky — from the very top of the dome. And now it's the shape of North America below, then the west coast — falling faster — Southern California, San Diego, hurtling down to gray coastline and the tops of hotels and beach condos, headfirst, twisting like a spear — plummeting down to the shores of Pacific Beach, past startled seagulls that swoop left and right, the sea sparkling blue, Crystal Pier stretching out past the waves with

surfers floating around it in black wetsuits, fishermen leaning against wood railings. And now zooming down to streetlevel, the boardwalk, the shell store, the surf shop, and ***SPLAT*** — splashed out across the asphalt like a glass of red fruit punch. My name is Joey Carr and I used to see fear as a channel I could change. My name is Joey Carr and I'm having a harder and harder time.

And now driving to work — a warm, drowsy afternoon, sun flashing through the windshield, clear blue sky with thin ropes of clouds, ragged white contrails of jets up from Miramar, the smell of eucalyptus in the air — gray treebark smell, a bitter and clean smell. The road up Mount Soledad — Soledad standing above the city like a hump of raw earth dropped from space — formless, covered in mansions, swimming pools, security gates, palm trees with ragged fronds hanging in the dusk and heat. Mexican gardeners standing up to stretch sore backs or squatting in the shade of humid ferns, sweating, walking back to the truck for icewater from an orange and white Gatorade cooler. Midway up Mount Soledad is Royal Canyon retirement center. I'm a waiter/busboy in the dining hall. (Fantastic.

I know. THNX xoxo LIFE.) In the parking lot I sit in my truck and snort a line of crystal off my ATM card and then open my door and step out onto solid ground and the world is good and safe and centered. I rub my jaw and laugh at nothing. Really. There's nothing. Me and nothing. But it's worth a laugh. The sun is setting over the rooftops — *haha* — the asphalt orangeblack and warm through the soles of my sneakers — *haha* — the smell of fall in the air, the ground humming, a low and steady vibrational purr from mountain slope to sea. Tyler's blue Mazda pulls into the parking lot and he beeps the horn twice and I see him wave and grin through the glass, the reflection of dark trees and earth and orangeblue sky panning across the windshield. I slam my door and jog over to meet him. Life: Haha.

TYLER MONAHAN

{Tyler — 19, long-limbed and bony, yellow farmboy hair, black highwater pants, gray argyle sweater, lowtop Converse sneakers. Tyler — after work, driving, seat pushed back as far as it can go, shifting gears,

stepping on the gas.] Joey and I are driving through Downtown to go buy crystal from Curt. Curt's twin sister Elsa was the one killed in that crazy 4th of July shooting a few years back. Just walking through the door at Hans Rieter and Sons to pick up a deli order for her grandmother and she smiled and said hi to the owner — a cousin on her dad's side — and the bullet — fired from a car — hit the back of her head. Bam. That was it. Elsa was beautiful — tall and thin and German-Mexican with long blonde hair and blue eyes. People said she just dropped on her side and lay there smiling, her blue eyes open and full of mirth, a pool of blood growing around her face. The shooter kept firing down the block and hit a kid on a skateboard and an old Cuban guy selling roses door to door. Only Elsa died. (Once when we were getting our new algebra books in the library I got Elsa's from the year she died. There was her name, like, *right there* — Elsa Santiago-Rieter written in cursive. I had to turn it in and get a new one; it was too weird.)

"Wow, look at the moon," says Joey, pointing at it. I don't care about the moon. Maggie hates the moon. She's afraid she'll look up and see a

chunk of it fall off. Like a wedge of rock will break off and come falling down and destroy the earth. The moon makes her anxious, frantic. She can't even *look* at it when it's full or she'll have to go inside. Of course I take it seriously because she does. Like when we were still dating, a full moon was a chance for me to show how brave I was. I mean, I know how this stuff works, the moon stuff I mean. The moon … the moon couldn't fall apart in the sky. It doesn't *work* that way. The moon is *there*. I don't care about the moon. Joey's asking about Chente's party. He wants to know if I'm going. "I guess. I don't know. I don't think Chente likes me." He tells me not to worry, that Chente likes me fine but I know he's lying. Joey's my best friend and I hate to say this but when he lies — and he lies a *lot* — it's super obvious. Like whenever he lies he looks down and his eyes glaze over and he doesn't say anything for a while. But because he's my friend I don't call him on it. Chente Ramirez … Chente totally and completely disregards me. It's like he's on TV and I'm watching his show. Chente's the kind of person who's a star and knows he's a star even if he isn't famous. I guess I'm the opposite — I'm realistic and I think in the end the realistic ones are the

ones who get what they want. Joey's neither; he's totally directionless. I can't imagine him as an older person and that scares me. Maggie and I always talk about that — how you can't imagine some people old, like they're not meant to grow up or something. Joey's brave and wild and he lives fast and doesn't think much about what's happening as it happens. He's the least introspective person that I know and it's refreshing. I like that about him but I'm not one of those kinds of people. Joey's impulsive in the way Maggie is. Why someone like Maggie fell in love with me I'll never know, but it was good. We never fought and we were never upset with each other. We were always happy, just really, really *happy*. And then she broke up with me this summer. Just like that. It was over and I was like, *Wait. Weren't we supposed to spend the rest of our lives together?*

JOEY CARR

[Joey — small jean jacket too short for his arms, Wranglers, red t-shirt, sneakers, short black hair. Palmsize to-do list book in his lap with

the word "date" embossed in gold lettering, the "d" blacked out with Sharpie ink. Joey — sitting on the seawall under a yellow cone of streetlight, legs dangling off, kicking his heals. Darkness all around. The beach sand gray in the moonlight. The ocean pitchblack and a dim line of purple at the horizon as if a wall of fire is coming from beyond the sea, burning the earth as it moves. The noise of the ocean, an exhalation, but constant — *haaaaaghhhhhhhhh*. Then from behind Joey comes the sound of a bicycle going past, slicking through a patch of wet sand on the boardwalk, a latenight rider headed south to the Courts.] Tonight before Tyler dropped me off at the beach we smoked some of the speed we bought and then sat in the car behind 7-Eleven and he told me all about him and Maggie and now I can't stop thinking about her. Maggie broke up with Tyler before I met him but from the pictures I've seen of her at Tyler's parents' house — a family vacation, Tyler's graduation, prom, homecoming — she's like someone from the distant past, more serious than people today. Intense but warm. Sensual in an Old World way. She could be some angry Greek teenager holed up in the hills with a carbine rifle while

the Nazis take her village — just waiting for her chance to sneak down under the cover of night and set things straight. Wow. My best friend's ex-girlfriend? I'm not like that. [Joey, lighting a cigarette and taking a long, ponderous drag, staring out to sea, the swirl of blackness and fog and night.] But fuck, I can see her, and there she is up in the hills above the Mediterranean, sitting with her narrow back against a pine tree, tiny and stick-thin in a man's workclothes and unlaced boots, rifle in hand, pulling back the bolt — ka-*CHIK* — eyes closed, listening to the sound of tanks rolling into her village, a voice barking orders in German, a shot rings out — clear, hard, echoing across the expanse of valley and sky. And she opens her big stormy eyes and grips her rifle stock, waiting, waiting.

MAGGIE HARKER

[Maggie — 17, big mop of curly black hair, uncombed. Milky complexion, frowning, brow furrowed, green eyes changing to hazel in the light. Tight gray jeans, ratty white camisole for a shirt, bare

shoulders, standing in the middle of her bed, not jumping on it but moving up and down, slowly, mindlessly, staring straight ahead.] Sometimes getting out of bed is like standing up from under a sheet of ice — breaking through the ice when no one can hear you beneath it. But sometimes it's different. Tonight I'm fine. [Steps off the bed onto the carpet. Singing along with the stereo] "Travel-ing, swallow-ing Drama-mine." Alright, okay, where are my shoes … shoes … there. [Picking up a dark red, single-buckle shoe.] The other one … under the bed … no. Wait, there. Where's my bag? Okay. [Picking up a green army surplus bag, small, covered in buttons with activist slogans and band names.] Oh, the doorbell. Alright. Mirror … hair? Ugh. Gross. Too late. Lemmie … find … a book. [On her knees, leaning to the side, reaching under the bed, digging past old cereal bowls, wadded-up socks, a large sewing needle brown with dried blood and — there — a paperback copy of *The Snows of Kilimanjaro and Other Stories*.] Something in case the party sucks. [Turns off the stereo. The room is quiet.] Tyler'll say girls don't read Hemingway but Tyler doesn't know anything about books. Tyler's taste in books … it's not

bad … it's just Victorian. He reads the kind of novels you'd imagine someone's spinster aunt — their awwwnt — reading. (Their gaunt aunt.) Women authors with icy names. Stories by sickly, cadaverous men. (I love that word, cadaverous.) Tyler's a strange guy but he's the kind of guy who opens doors for you and remembers your birthdays and stuff. Tyler I've known so long I forget all the good things about him. It's like when you have a picture on your wall that's been there forever and you don't even see it anymore. Tyler … fuck, man, it's complicated … oh, the doorbell, right.

TYLER

[Bent at the waist, holding the mailslot open and looking into it — a rectangular spyglass version of Maggie's mom's livingroom — dark blue couches and matching bucket chair, Americana art on the crème white walls, standup piano with photos arranged across the top, bedroom door, bathroom door, tall lamp, redwood French doors out into the yard, coffeetable piled up in Mexican food takeout boxes and

soda cups and yellow paper used to wrap El Coxitan burritos. A gray cat stalking into the kitchen sees Tyler watching and races off into the hallway.] I can't believe this. They never lock the door and tonight [Shouting, highvoiced, reedy, mouth to the mailslot] "*Doorbelllll! Maaaaaaggie!*"

NICOLE HALE

[Nicole — 21, sitting crosslegged in her bedroom, short brownhair tucked behind her ears, heartshaped face, freckles, beat-up sneakers, baggy overalls with a white hooded sweatshirt. Rory — 20, knee to knee with Nicole, bong sitting between them, giggling. Best friends. Rory — tall, busty, chin-length redhair, new jeans and a lowcut pink sweater, barefoot, highheel shoes on the floor next to her. Nicole — holding the bong to her mouth while Rory lights it.] "Hahahahaha! Holy shit, no keep it lit! Wait, alright. Oh my god I'm way too stoned for this! Rory, Rory, you have to — no, wait, listen — you have to be my *protector* tonight. No, listen, *you're my knight in shining armor.* It's

not cheesy! I'm not drunk! What? No! It's not. And girls can *too* be knights. There were *girl knights*. There *totally* were. Okay, light it again. Okay. Hold on. Light it. Yeah … uh … hhhhhooaaaaahhhuh (cough cough) I hate (cough cough) smoking (cough) *weed!* Hahahaha! Oh my god. I'm sorry. Rory dahling will you ever forgive me? Your turn. Yours. Take it. *Take* it. Hahahaha! Your face looks like an *elephant!* Hahaha! No. It's okay. Try again. Okay. There. Good work. I know, *right?* Fuck bongs, dude. I can't do it. Oh! Turn up the radio! No, this song's *great*. No, totally, just wait! Rory?! I *hate* you. I can't believe you changed the *station* on me. No, no, hahahahaha! Let's go. Come on. You are *not*. If Joey's there? *Fuck Joey*, dude. You have no idea. I know, *I know*, but you didn't see the *side* of him that I — what? Yeah. If he's there I'll talk to him; I don't care. I'm *over* that shit, dude. Give me a cigarette. I should invite David. *No*, David is *not* too old to go to our parties! He's *not!* He's sweeeeeeeet. He's *sweet*, Rory! You don't even know. He's totally a sweetheart and the nicest guy in the world. Oh shit! This song's classic! Turn it up!" [Singing] "A scrub is a guy that thinks he's fine [and is] also known as a *buster*."

TED BOONE

[Ted Boone – 31, sitting on the couch in his apartment, hairy legs spread, boxers and a Stooges t-shirt, tall and potbellied, greasy hair parted down the middle, drooping mustache, jowly, head cocked left, blank-eyed, open-mouthed, the TV glowing in front of him, a jug of Carlo Rossi burgundy next to his bare feet.] *These fucking kids.* Was I like that? No. *God* no. Alright, introduction to persuasive debate and two-part *bestiarum vocabulum*: A few minutes ago kid #1 Tyler Monahan called to ask if I'd heard from kid #2 Joey Carr about the party. Description of primary culprit: Joey Carr is like an ant in a glass farm on your desk. An ant – hard worker of mindless jobs – he's a busboy slash waiter – generally insignificant, a rusty lever to broken fuses, but a lovable guy. Can an ant be lovable? Cartoon ants are lovable and Joey's a cartoon. Cartoon ants – close your eyes and imagine: twitching antenna, big globular emotional eyes, *sad eyes* – sad because the ant's mother just died, crushed (the *mother*, under a tennis shoe and then, by weight of metaphysical impact, by weight of

grief, *him* — crushed and brooding. And what does he have to live for now? The big swarming colony looks on, unimpressed by loss or death or mourning; industrious for the good of queen and colony.) What's the measure of one tiny ant? What's the measure of Joey Carr? Joey Cartoon is the perfect Californian because he's a man of much quaking and many faults. Joey's arrogant and he mythologizes his quote unquote adventures like getting drunk in an alley with a bunch of Mexicans makes him Indiana Jones. Indiana Jones and the Temple of Dumb. Which is what he is — coarse, inarticulate, quick to anger, quick to slowness of thought, self-obsessed, melodramatic, fatalistic. Tyler? Concise character assessment in five simple words: Tyler's quiet but he's okay. Elaboration, extrapolation, and backcycle: Joey you see in big, rowdy packs of people (but like other things in packs — gum, cigarettes — no individual thought.) Joey goes to shows and parties and chases girls (badly) and gets up to quote unquote no good and spends a lot of time yelling and falling down and throwing up and complaining. (It's a pitiful thing to watch — like a dog having painful diarrhea.) Tyler you see alone, alone in a coffeeshop studying,

alone driving, alone on some street corner with a book under his arm, alone looking at things in a shop window (which is the alonest thing of all). Ted Boone? Me? I'm so glad you asked because the answer is an inspiring note of affirmation and praise. Ted Boone is a great hoary buffalo made from pure prairie granite. Magnificent Ted Boone! Unimpeachable! (Possibly evil. Verdict still pending.) Ted Boone — mind like a set of gnashing steel jaws (double sets of teeth like a shark and like a shark I am known for frenzies). Manhood like a telephone pole out there standing in the wind, creaking with the breezes and pining for a nice new foundation to sink itself into — no love, just a good *stab* into soft cement. *Total. Phallic. Immersion.* Summation followed by savage closing statement: Witness Ted Boone on the edge of the world, toes over the board like a diving board diver, picking off surfers and boardwalk cops with a sniper rifle. In crystallized essence: a blazing supernova among burntout matchheads. Can you smell the sulfur? That's the smell of wasted lives. Not mine. *Theirs.*

NICOLE

Rory where'd we *park?* Hahahaha! I'm such a *stoner!* There! It's there! I'll race you. I don't care. Take off your shoes. Don't be a bitch. You are if I say you are. What? A bitch because you bark at cats and eat dog food like you love it. What? No. Okay. On your marks. Okay. Don't cheat. On your — *wait.* Okay. Right. On your marks, get set, go!

JOEY

[Sitting in the cab of his truck, looking out at the skyline below him — the lights of the city winking through the fog.] After I left the beach I walked to my aunt's house, got my truck and drove up to the top of Mount Soledad and stopped at the park by the veterans memorial cross. It's great up here, the highest point as far as you can see, the big illuminated crucifix behind you — 43 feet tall from base to crosshead, looming concrete glowing white — the whole lit-up city grid sprawling below. I like to sit in my truck and look out at all this land and imagine how it was before the city came. Miles of wetlands and

marsh leading up to the shore, places for cattle to graze, flat ground for railroad tracks and grainfields, wow, but nothing yet, nothing but windswept fields and sea. And there on the top of a weedy hill, a woman and man in old fashion clothes standing next to a horsecart, the man holding his hat down with one hand, the wind flapping his coat and pulling at his vest, the woman tall and proud in her bustle dress, arm linked in his, looking out at all this *land*. I've always felt at home up here — the parking lot, circular around the cross with spaces facing cliffside like flower petals. The sea to the west. Hills and suburban sprawl east. La Jolla and more darkened coastline north to Del Mar and Solana Beach. To the south — Mission Bay, the bridges, Vacation Village, the SeaWorld tower, Fiesta Island, Sports Arena, Downtown, the airport, then the hills and radio towers of Tijuana. On nights like this the parking lot is full of kids in cars drinking beer and making out or sitting on the railing at the cliff's edge talking and laughing. I used to come here with Nicole before we were seeing each other. We'd listen to 91X or the oldies station and she'd talk about Ian and how much they fought and I'd try to be supportive. The night

we got together it was right here below the cross. Me and Nicole in my beat-up old Suburban with the folddown seats and blacktint back windows — my first car. We'd been at the beach all day and we were sunburnt and she said she'd rub aloe on my back if I did hers. She turned away from me and pulled up her shirt and I put my hands on the pink, burned skin of her back and she said, "Ow!" But then she turned around and we were kissing and after a while we climbed into the backseats and folded them down flat and spread out a Mexican blanket. It was hot, I remember that. Was it July? August? Lying there in front of me with her shirt off, she was sweaty, sweat shining on her belly and on the bottoms of her tits, her hair stuck to her forehead, matted, and she said, "If you had condoms you'd be fucking me right now." I was scared. Scared about Ian kicking my ass. Scared because in school people called Nicole a slut and sluts meant diseases. "I don't need a condom," I said. I tried to say it tough but it didn't come out that way. "If I give you anything you can totally kick my ass," she said. (Like that meant anything. Like I would kick her ass.) And before I knew it I was on top of her and she had her pants off and she was

yanking down mine and then she was pulling her panties to the side and helping me in and then I came. It was fast. Just a minute or two "I just came," I said. "So did I," she said. I mumbled something like Huh or What and she said it again, "I came. I came as soon as you pushed in." Girls I was with before never came. They did what you wanted until you were done and didn't say much about it. Nothing I ever did lead to anything. Making Nicole come I felt like a god. Maybe that's why I fell in love with her so fast, why I took the risk that Ian might kill me. I was 18. Three years have passed and it feels like forever. Nicole's out of my life. Ian's gone off to school in Long Beach. And now it's just me. Up here in the same parking lot. The same jeans. New sneakers but the same style. Nothing but dark sky and moon above and the city below.

MAGGIE

[Sitting in the passenger seat, Tyler driving to the party. The cab dark. The freeway — streaking lights of cars and the city as two walls

gauntleting the road, the yellow darkness of an overpass, bright lights again. Maggie — the book in her lap, turns up the car stereo, singing quietly, just below her breath] "It's just like heaven bein' here with you."

TED BOONE

I drove by the party and I saw all those teenagers outside and I just kept driving. Sometimes I forget I'm not young anymore. (And sometimes I remember and when I remember it's the worst.) I drove slow past the crowd and some of them looked in at me. Them walking, bottles in hands, clink clank, skinny legs, "haw haw," "fuck this and fuck that," staggering for dramatic effect, and I felt bulky and old and weak. I drove by and I could just *see* old Teddy Boone waddling up the porchsteps like a fat, gray, plucked turkey — widdle waddle, a butterball, goosebumped flesh — and I could hear them saying, "Who invited *Thanksgiving*?" Kids that age are so mean — so smart and so sharp in their attack. *Argh*. I drove past the house and

I'm still driving. Yup, me, me, me, bounce, bounce. Me here, higgy sniggy *me*. I'm in my 30s now and I've done absolutely *nothing* with my life. No one knows me … but they *will*. One day they'll say, "Gah! Ugh! Argh! *Eeeugh!*" (they'll have *seizures* thinking about) "All the time *wasted* not knowing that big, hulkin' mountain of a man *Ted Boone!*" That's when the MacArthur people will come calling. I'll peek out my blinds and see them shuffling on the stoop of my apartment, coughing into their fist, big yellow novelty check under arm, bashful, eyes cast down to the Yosemite Sam welcome mat. I'll open the door and they'll stammer all over themselves apologizing for not getting in touch before now (and *profusely* because they'll truly *care* about my wellbeing. Various stages of it too — my being, my wellness, me being well, and the wellness of my being.) And they will say, "Ted Boone, we are *so sorry* we didn't get in touch before now." And I'll shake my head wisely, Zeus-like, amused. "The Genius Grant?," I'll say, "Okay, fine, if I *have* to." When my ship comes in I'm getting a big fucking — wait, what, no *way*, I can't belie — no way! "Here Comes Success" on the *radio!?* It's a sign!" [Turns up the car

stereo, driving, singing along] "Here comes success! Over my hill! Over my hill. Here comes success! Here comes success. Here comes my car! Here comes my car. Here comes my Chinese rug! Here comes my Chinese rug. Here comes success! Here comes success. Yooawwwoooeah!" Yow! Success! It's like a link of golden chain cut from the Greater Rope, and it's right fucking *there!* It's floating in the blackest reaches of space and I'm a space fish — a cosmonautical vessel, a serpentine rainbow trout! Shimmering! Iridescent like a swirl of motor oil in water! And I'm swimming through the interstellar regions rangy as an icewolf and *hungry* for gold! [Singing again] "In the last ditch! In the last ditch. I'll think of you! I'll think of you. In the last ditch! In the last ditch. I will be true! I will be true. Sweetheart I'm telling you! Sweetheart I'm telling you. Here comes the zoo! Here comes the zoo." I'll be a massive thing one day. I'll be a deadly giant. A basilisk. [The song ends followed by station identification, a famous Irish singer saying, "You are listening to 91X … the cutting edge of *rock*." Ted Boone's face goes pale and slack at the sound of the man's voice. He shakes his head sadly.] I will. I will.

My god. Oh wow. Ugh. [Shakes his head again, beaten.] I will. Long after my life is over. After I'm a box of bleached-out sticks and dyed hair in the ground. After everyone who ever knew me is gone — sticks too, or *ashes*. A pile of soot. What a thing to be reduced to. You can't enjoy anything when you're a corpse. Success meaneth fuck-*all* to the corpsey bestowed-upon, the belatedly celebrated *dead*. Fuck the *dazzles of posthumous acclaim*. What a trap! A bone tossed! A kite string and a carrot for the deluded and dreamers. Fuck the glorious future and the gilded tomorrow. Fuck distant potential and wishful thinking and could bes and maybes and if onlys. Fuck everything but what you can hold in your mean angry hand right fucking *now*. Drive *on*, Ted Boone. Drive on through darkness and fog, through crippling self-doubt and the shrieking ghosts of nobodies. Drive on until the lights of the border welcome you in green-lit arms. (Is there another world I should've been born into? Is there a base-current that is Light to this Dark?)

BEN FRANK

[Sitting in the passenger seat of the panel van Nate just stole, his feet on the dash. Ben Frank — 16 and three quarters, tall for his age in an old unmatched suit, threadbare. Flapping leather dress-shoes, one duct-taped together around the toe, no socks. Big thick blackframe glasses, black hair standing up in the back. Dusty suitjacket covered in glued-on costume jewels, anchor stickpins, and military medals. A 32oz Big Gulp of Coke between his knees. Ben Frank — watching a church pass by the window on 30th Street, thinking] You know what, God? I've been ruined ever since I stopped believing in you. Sitting in that booth at Shelton's with my family after watching *Platoon* and it all came to me at once and I sat up in my seat and said, "Wait, I'm going to *die*?" God, if you were real I'd fucking kick your head off. I'd reach down your neck and tear out your spine and use it to beat my enemies to pieces.

[Nate, driving with one hand, drumming his fingers on his knee with the other. Nate — 17, skinny, tall, gaunt-faced, acne, bowl of black hair over his forehead. Tight black jeans, sneakers, sleeveless pink shirt with "pizza," "sodomy," and "bugz" written on it in black marker.

Clears his throat, looks at Ben Frank, says] "You wanna go to that party on Auburn? The one the Gravestones are playing?"

"It's Grave*Tones* and fuck that band. You know what, fuck San Diego parties altogether. No more fucking parties. If I end up going to that party I'm gonna kill somebody." [Holds his hand to the light of oncoming traffic, shielding his eyes.] "I'm going to cut somebody open with my sword and climb into their body and walk around in them like a suit of armor." [Laughing, half-serious. Then darkening to serious, squinting, looking down at the Big Gulp in his lap.]

[Nate, smiling.] "Oh yeah?"

[Ben Frank, sips his Big Gulp until it's empty, thinking hard, distracted, setting the cup down, mumbling] "Yeah."

[Nate pulls up to a stoplight and Ben Frank hands him the Big Gulp.] "Thanks." [Nate, slurping at the straw. Nothing. Shakes the cup. The rattle of ice. Nate, tossing the empty cup in the back of the van.] "So, no to the party?"

"Just keep … make a left here. Nate … *look*, Nate, the only way

I'd go to this party is to show up wrapped in dynamite and blow the place up." [Ben Frank smiling now.] "Okay, adventures in shoplifting … did I tell you about what I stole today?"

"No."

"I stole a giant cardboard sign that reads No Shoplifting."

"Oh wait you did tell me."

"Want me to tell you again?" [Smiling big.]

"Sure." [Laughs.]

"I stole a giant sign that reads No Shoplifting." [Nate laughing. Ben Frank laughing, sticks his feet up on the dash, knocks the sides of his shoes together.]

MAGGIE

[Sitting in the passenger seat. An argument with Tyler still hanging in the air. Hanging like droplets of blood in zero gravity, a spray of tiny rubies. Tyler driving fast, grinding through the gears, angry.] What

did I do? *Fuck, man*, Tyler makes me feel like I'm an evil fucking person sometimes. I should open this door and throw myself out.

TED BOONE

[Pushing through the turnstile gates at the US/Mexico border. Walking down the dark passway into the streetlamp-lit square, child-beggars all around, moon hanging low and yellow above the rooftops, old women sitting on colorful blankets selling bracelets and tiny wooden flutes. Loud music from clubs and bars, mariachi musicians on corners singing and strumming guitars. Taco carts, taxis in lines, churro stands, a man selling handfuls of fake gold necklaces, a pack of sailors in all white crossing the street. A cabdriver approaching, waving to get Ted Boone's attention.] "Hey, hey, my friend! Where you wanta go? I take you. Less go, my friend."

"*Well* mah good and hustorically storied suh," [Ted Boone, pretending to be a Southern gentlemen.] "Ah *wahnt* to go watch some naked Mesican girls dance at the nudie bah. Ah say, drive-uh, do you

know the strip bah Peanits n Beer down on Rev'lution? I he-uh it's a *Monstuh Man'yul* of wild and strange *glories*." [The driver shrugs and grins and makes the OK sign with his hand and they walk to the taxi together. Ted Boone squeezing into the backseat. The driver shutting the door. Jogging around the car, plunking down into the front.] "Ah say, drive-uh, can ah smoke in he-uh?"

"Surewhynot. Of course senor. You wanta buy *mota*? Weed?"

"No, uh, no … not tonight, but ah thank you mah good mahn. Just kine'ly direct yo's truly to the near'st festering fleshpot."

"Okay senor wuhever you wan I get. Peanuts and Beer here we come my friend."

I could be a big man down here. They would make me a god and hold me aloft on a rickshaw made of human bones and flayed goatskin and build mud statues of me. I should write a book about Mexico. *Me, Standing on a Tower of Skulls Amongst the Savage Azteca*. The closest I've come to actualized, *realized*, ultimate Ted Boonness was my unfinished book, *Lo, Stir the Sands of Revolution! Down in the*

Cattleland is Home For Me. Of course I never made it past the first chapter — 17 pages handwritten — but the idea was there. Close your eyes and imagine it. The parchment of the *Constitution* came from the skin of an animal. This is true. Look it up. Now imagine a novel told from the perspective of that animal. A milk cow. Andrea the Cow I called her. And throughout the book you see the story of early Angloamerican civilization told through the eyes of this cow. Born in a manger. Mated with a bull. Maybe she falls in love. Maybe she escapes one night and makes a bulge-eyed run for the woods and meets Indians and famous historical figures. (It was going to be a satire, but wildly emotional — a big, elaborate torrential work of genius. Labyrinthine, Biblical, mystic, gnostic, a novel full of stories within stories, all of life and death and history and politics and culture stacked up and reaching to the sky like a Jenga tower piled infinite.) Maybe the cow saves a kid from something. A burning something, or quicksand or a sinkhole (or all three.) And of course she delivers her calf and even though we know she doesn't survive — remember her tragic and *important* fate — her calf, Little Fred Broone

the Calf, breaks free and navigates the new, wild continent and lives unfettered and ferocious on the plains with the great American buffalo who make him their chief. (Which is a set-up for the sequel.) Of course I never got that far. It was a few pages of intro, a chapter of patchy philosophy about capitalism and manifest destiny, an analogy regarding determinism vis-a-vis predestination, an Ayn Rand joke, a poignant tangent about an imaginary diner in Iowa with a teenage waitress leaning on the counter and staring out into the mysterious night, wishing to be anywhere but there (a symbolic representation of the cow standing at her pasture gates.) I got as far as establishing my thesis and moral idea and introducing Andrea the Cow (and at *birth*, no less, pulled steaming from her mother). But imagine what would come *later*. Imagine all the things that longlashed cow would *see!* The world would fall in love with Andrea the Cow. And then, collectively, and in epic fashion, their heart would break.

NICOLE

[Out of breath, panting, bent over, hands on her knees.] "See? That's. Why I can. Call. *Call* you a bitch. And stupid and ugly and get away with it."

[Rory — sitting crosslegged on the sidewalk. Breathing hard, flushfaced. Shoes next to her in the grass.] "Why?"

"Because I can beat you in a footrace and anyone you can beat in a race is your servant for life." [Reaching down, offering a hand, pulling Rory up.] "Gimmie your keys. *I'm* driving."

BEN FRANK

[The van stops at a red light. Ben Frank sitting up in his seat, frowning. The light changes to green.] "Green light. Go. Nate, I'd like to find a bunch of disease-ridden apes and let them swarm all over the city and give everyone Ebola and gangrene and AIDS. I'd like to see the mayor's face when I toss a bomb through his office window.

Fuck the mayor. He should have AIDS. What? Who's the mayor? I don't know. It doesn't matter. The mayor's Shamu. I don't care. Nate, me and you and this city we're at *war.*" [Pausing, thinking, staring out the window.] "It's a war against dumb fucking idiots we're better than and we need *fuel.*" [Smiling.] "*Pizza.* There. Park by the sign. Domenico's. The best. Trust me."

NICOLE

[Driving, seat pushed as far forward as it can go, hugging the wheel, singing joyfully] "Rory, Rory, Rory, her sister's really whorey! Her face is — "

"Dude, *Nicole*, watch where you're *going!*"

"Hahaha. I know what I'm *doing.*" [Honks horn.] "Look out, dingleberry! *That's* a bad driver right there. Rory, light me a cigarette. I need a *cigarette!*"

"We smoked my last one."

"I need to smoke before I see David."

"David's coming to the party?"

"I invited him."

"*Nicole!*"

"He's great. You just need to — "

"*Dude*, he's 50."

"He is not *50!*"

"He *is*. He's 50, Nicole. I can't *believe* you're dating a guy who's—"

"He's 47 and he's still *totally* young. All that *bikeriding*."

"He rides a motorcycle?"

"A bike. Dude, he does, like, he does *triathlons* and shit. He's all muscle. Like zero point one percent body fat. Anyway, it's not like *you* haven't dated older guys. Richard the butt doctor?"

"Richard the butt doctor was different. Ooh, look, Domenico's! We should totally get *pizza!* Domenico's! C'mon!" [Nicole drives past

Domenico's and pulls up to the stoplight, engine idling. Rory smiles at a tough-looking Mexican boy in a black muscle car next to her. The Mexican boy nods at her, taps the gas, and the engine roars and booms. Nods again, smiles, proud.]

[The boy, smiling, yelling out the window] "Hey where you *going?!*"

"A *party.*"

"Where what party?"

[Before Rory can answer, Nicole steps on the gas and speeds away from the light just as it turns to green. Rory looking back at the Mexican boy as his car makes a right turn onto El Cajon Boulevard. She blows him a kiss, laughing, leaning out the window on her elbows, looking back, her hair blowing around her face, smile fading, staring, he's gone, staring, gone. Sits back in her seat.]

[Nicole smacking her hand on the steeringwheel.] "Rory, you're gonna get us *killed.* You need to stop talking to *murderers.*"

"That guy was cool." [Quietly] "He was nice."

"That guy had *rabies*. And *Domenico's?* Rory, you must be smoking crack every *second* because Domenico's pizza tastes like barf on bread and I found a *hair* in their cheesybread once. A thick, wide black *hair. This* wide, Rory. Look. This wide." [Nicole makes an inch with her fingers.] "I hope Domenico's goes out of business *tomorrow*. I should drive this car through their window. Rory, I'm pulling over at the next gas station and you can get a Dove bar or something. We need cigarettes or I'm gonna get furious and start assassinating people."

JOEY

[Sitting on the tailgate of his truck in the Dairy Queen parking lot eating a butterscotch dip cone.] I can't believe Josh Calhoun works at *Dairy Queen*. Wasn't he going to be a doctor or a football player or a judge or something? Didn't he go *back east* for school? What a fucking *douche* that guy was. Treating everybody like secondclass citizens. I hope he recognized me. I hope he's fucking embarrassed. I'm not one

to talk about jobs but *Dairy Queen? Josh Calhoun?* I can't wait to tell Tyler.

[Silver minivan pulls into the parking lot, stops at Joey's truck, window rolling down, Suzy Dillard, the new girl from work, sitting in the passenger seat — dishwater blonde hair, braces, smiling.] "Joeeey!"

"Hey Suzy. You going to that party?"

"No. The movies."

"Alright. You should stop by if you get bored."

"Okaaay, maybe."

"See ya."

"Bye, Joeeeeey." [Suzy — waving happily. The minivan pulls into the drivethru, brakelights flash.] Suzy Dillard's looking good. Who's she with? Who's that driving? No way. Ben *Strasse* that fucking Nazi. I can't *believe* it.

MAGGIE

The weird thing about Tyler is I think I still love him. I don't want to be with him, like as his *girlfriend*, but I still love him, and I'm still attracted to him. It's hard to explain. [Tyler squints at the address numbers on the houses lining the block and sees nothing but dark porches.] He's lost. He's acting like he knows where we are but I think he's lost. I should say something. He needs to know this isn't a big deal. Him being lost isn't going to start a fight but I bet he thinks it will. I don't care about shit like that. We should get lost more often. Wow, this is great — the Mexican part of town. I'd like to live here. I need to do something on my own terms — just to prove I can do it without depending on someone else. Mexicans don't like Tyler. It's like him ordering food at El Cotixan — *I'll have uno chicken burrrrrrito, no salsa, no sauce, no sour crrrrema*, rolling the r's all crazy, so fucking condescending and he doesn't even know it. But Mexicans like me. Mexican men do, and sometimes it scares me. These *men*, I mean, *looking* at me. I know what they want and I'm not saying I don't want it too — even though I haven't done it yet, all the *way*, I mean. But they're

not the safe, *effeminate*, shy, hipster boys I hang out with. They have this kind of heavy, mean quiet in them that the boys I know don't have. It's unsettling. Like they could do anything at any minute. It scares me, but I like it. It's nice not knowing what's fucking *ahead of you* all the time. Wow, look at that church. I bet their churches would be great to go to and sit there and sing with them. Even if you didn't know what the words meant. Just to feel the voices all around you, all that love and faith. Wow, this *totally* looks like Mexico. Like when we went down with the church to Mil Calabasas and slept in the onionfields. The drive down, anyway — through the towns. Oh wait, I'm totally not listening to what he's saying! "I'm sorry, Tyler, what? Joey was what?"

"Anyway, Joey and I are at the Empire Club for their all-ages goth night, Warsaw."

"Joey Carr's goth?" That would be silly.

"No, he's not but we were there for Warsaw because it's something to do and he ends up talking to his big black girl who calls herself Opium."

"That's so dumb."

"What is?"

"Calling yourself Opium. Tyler, can we stop somewhere and get something to eat?"

"You're *hungry* again?"

[Shrugs, sinks low in her seat.] "I don't know … I guess not."

"I've got a bag of celery sticks in my backpack."

[Looks down. Mumbles] "Poison."

"So anyway, we go out to the alley and Joey and Opium are sharing one of those little flat bottles of tequila, and then they're kissing, which is weird because she's really, really big and tall and he's really, really skinny and small."

"You rhymed."

"And he's standing there in the alley kissing her and it looks like a little cat standing on its tiptoes to kiss a bear. When they stop she's all, 'I got two *keeds*. You gonna be a *good* man for my *keeds*.' And he's,

like, shrugging and stuff and kind of ignoring her, lighting a cigarette, looking around, messing with the cellphone he stole from his uncle, smiling."

"Tyler that was the most racist black girl impression of all time. I can't believe you. Oh look. I think we're here. You should park. That's ... yeah, that's definitely a party right there."

"Those kids in front of the house?"

"That's the party."

"You sure? Maggie, you *sure*? Where's the address I gave you? Do you have the address?"

"No. But that's the party."

"Maggie, you need to find the thing where I wrote the *address*. We can't just show up to somebody's party in the ghetto and go inside."

"Why not?"

"Maggie you need to find — let's... we'll just wait a second and see if Joey's truck shows up." [Tyler parallel parking, arm over the

headrest of the passenger seat, looking behind him through the back window. Pulls into the spot, shuts off the engine.] "So anyway ... roll up your window... anyway Opium's like, 'Now that you my *man* you *bettuh* not leave me because my *keeds* needs a *daddy*. I'm friends with the Hell's Angels and — "

[Maggie, bored, feet on the dash.] "Are the Hell's Angels goth?" *Blaaaah*.

"No, but ... oh wait, that's Joey's truck. No it's not. Okay, anyway, there's me and Joey and Opium and Joey's drunk and he's not really paying attention to her anymore. She's all, 'You gon stick around, right?' and Joey's like, 'Yeah, yeah,' and she's all, 'Because if you *ain't* the Hell's Angels gon come and they gon *keeel* your ass,' and Joey's like, 'Yeah, yeah,' totally not listening but then I see it sink in."

"I'm going into this party shoeless."

"No you're not. And Joey tells Opium that he and I need to go inside and get our jackets. He takes the bottle and caps it and sticks it under his arm and we walk around the corner back to the club and

Joey says, 'Tyler, *run*' under his breath and I'm like 'Huh?' and then he shouts 'RUN!' and we take off running and we're yelling and laughing and we jog down the block passing the bottle back and forth and when it's done he throws it at the side of the building and it totally explodes! SMASH! We get in the car and we're out of breath and he's singing a made-up song about kicking bikers' asses and we peel out and drive away. It was great. It was — "

"What about your jackets? You said you were going back inside to get your jackets but then you just *ran away*. Did you leave your jackets at the club?"

"There weren't any jackets. He made them up … you know, to get away."

"Sorry. Go on." [Maggie yawning, head against the window, holding the book in her hands, tapping it against her chin.]

"Aaaanyway, we stay away from the Empire Club for a few weeks but we keeping talking about that night, always kind of, like, *daring* ourselves to go back there and see what happens. One night we're

at Cafe Crema sitting at one of the outside tables. I was studying and Joey was smoking cigarettes and looking at a copy of the *Reader* and complaining about it and then he's like, 'Tyler, we need to go to Warsaw tonight' and gets this naughty grin on his face and long story short we go there, get in the door, see Opium — like from across the dancefloor — and we turn around and head back out and as we're walking to Joey's truck we see a carload of guys — like a big old yellow lowriding Buick — pull up in front of the club and they get out and they're these … they're *Hell's Angels*, bikers, big guys. They've got the sleeveless jackets and everything, long hair, *beards* and, like, black leather, tattoos. It was the Hell's Angels."

[Maggie, bored.] "Crazy. Alright. You wanna go to this party?"

[Tyler unsnapping his seatbelt.] "I guess."

"Okay. *Shoeless*."

BEN FRANK

[Sitting in the passenger seat, the lights of storefronts moving past, the closed-up post office, McDonald's — full of peope, bright-lit — a corner market with dim neons, a liquor store, a taco shop, the bank. A silver minivan pulls up next to Nate and Ben Frank. A blonde guy with bad skin is driving and a small blonde girl sits in the passenger seat holding a Starbucks cup.] Wait, *Suzy*? [The minivan turns left at the light.] No. It couldn't have … no … that would be too weird. Fucking *Suzy*. Where *are* you, Suzy? I should drop an atom bomb on your dad's house I hate you so much. Remember when I was on acid and we walked around the koi pond in the gardens at sunset? The sun was going down and we were so serious and you were pink in the face from walking and you took off your glasses and wiped the sweat from under your eyes and I looked at you and I could see something bigger than us. It was so *hot* and the sky was bloodred and low and burnt around the edges and all the shadows in the ferns and the bird of paradise were quivering. We didn't say anything but we looked at each other and we were happy. And not the happy where you smile or laugh or act silly. A

bigger kind of grounded, satisfied happy. A scary kind of happy — like if we talked, if we said *anything* and acknowledged what was happening between us, the scenery would roll right up and we'd be on a movie set — floorboards, cameras, scaffolding, blinding lights, the director yelling, "Cut! Stop! Cut! Goddammit, *cut!*" We'd be strangers again, actors, co-workers. I hate that I miss you. I keep thinking about you behind the counter at Submarina in your little uniform looking at me like we were never anything. Looking at me like I was just a fucking customer, saying, "What kind of bread you want that on?" I don't care if your boss was watching. Fuck you and your boss and your stupid sleepy smile and your braces. Fuck your nose ring and your little chin and fuck all your celebrity magazines and Disney DVDs and fuck your cat. [Staring out the window, shoes on the dash. Silent. Sits up straight again.] "Nate, hey Nate, let's go to that party. Let's do it. Stop somewhere and we'll get someone to buy us beer. I need something to settle my stomach."

"Cool. Okay."

The pizza was a disappointment. The pepperoni were like scabs and it was so greasy it looked like it was *bleeding*. Nate called it *scabs*

and pus on slices of skin and turned it into a rap song and came up with a dance for it and did it in the middle of the place and these drunk bros from the bar next door were clapping and hooting at him. Then the guy behind the counter told us to leave if we didn't like it. After we — "Nate, whoa, slow down. Slow down. *The fog.*"

"I love the fog."

"Nate, at least — "

[Rapping] "Scabs and *pus* on slices of skin! We're not *above* it!" [Looks over at Ben Frank, smiling big.] "You know you *love* it! Scabs and — "

"Naaate!" [Ben Frank, arms in front of his face, knees pulled up to his chest. And then the crash.]

NICOLE

[Nicole — driving, singing] "If you wanna buy a truck go see Cal. If you wanna spend a buck go see Cal!"

"Those aren't the words."

"Shut up and riiiide, beee*awtch*. If you wanna buy a truck go see Cal. No, you know what? Listen, Rory. Listen. I need to tell you something."

"What." [Said without the question mark. Rory — tired, over it, bored.]

"I'm serious, Rory. This is really … this is me being *serious*. I can't believe you sometimes. I just want to open up and be hon — "

"I'm sorry, Nicole. What is it?"

"Rory, look, I need to tell you that … I need to tell you… that if you want to.. spend a buck, if you wanna drive a truck! If you wanna spend a buck! Go see Cal! Go see Cal! Go see Cal! Go see Cal, Rory. Go *see* him. Rory, cigarette. It's time. Cigarette me. *Cigarette me*, Rory!"

"They're in my purse on the backseat, I can just get — Nicole! Wait! Watch — "

BEN FRANK

I saw the car before Nate did. It hit us broadside and pushed us into the intersection and I looked into the back of the van in time to see the sidedoor denting inward and the light from the other car's headlamps coming through which was … it was *beautiful*, it was like a giant insect with a thousand glowing eyes tearing into the van to get us. Of course this was slow motion like they always say and the other car was pushing us and I could hear tires screeching and then we hit the telephone pole.

NICOLE

I was fine but the airbag broke Rory's nose and she was crying and blood was running down her chin and I didn't know what to do. Luckily, because I'm a genius, I found a sweater in the backseat and she took it and held it up to her nose. The song on the radio was like "To the *end of the road!* And I *can't let go!*" and we were just *right there* with the front end of her dad's Honda smashed up into the side

of that fucking creepy rapist van and then this ridiculous-looking kid got out. He was wearing some kind of ratty fucking threepiece suit and he had these big ol' owl glasses like a toddler dressed up as a fucking professor. He stands there kind of wide-eyed in shock and then he turns around and runs off. Doesn't even check to see if we're alive! I mean, *what?* And then the other kid climbs out through the same door and he's just as weird. Tight black pants and big sneakers, sleeveless pink t-shirt with shit written all over it but he's kind of … he was actually kind of hot. Bad skin and dressed like he was insane but I saw him and I was like, Whoa, dude's kind of a *hottie*. And then he does the same thing as the first kid. He stares at us all freaked-out and then runs down the block leaving me with smoke gushing out of the engine and a bloody, crying Rory. And I'm sitting there smoking my cigarette and I wanna fucking assassinate *everybody* — those two kids, the inventor of cigarettes, Rory, myself, *everybody*.

BEN FRANK

Nate and I ran until we couldn't anymore and then we hid in a public restroom in the park. We sat in the stalls next to each other for a long time not saying anything. Then I heard Nate kind of groan and go *Ughh* and then he starts pissing. And then I pissed. That was better.

Nate was the first to speak. "Should we try to go to that party?"

"How close are we?"

"I don't know. *Pretty far.* We could take the *bus.*"

"We could."

And onward.

BEN BOONE

[Sitting in the stripclub's backroom, a curtained-off lapdance partition. Red walls and a black leather bench. The girl — dark brown skin, naked, moving with the pulse of the music, muffled

from the main room. The girl sitting on his lap now with her back to him, grabbing his thighs with her hands, rubbing her ass into his crotch. Ted Boone reaching up to touch her left tit, holds onto the nipple, tugs it — tentatively. The girl taking his hand, moving it down to his side, whispering, "*No*, my fren." Ted Boone, a bored king on his throne, locked in a late-night daydream, dreaming] "And our first guest tonight is the author Ted Boone. Ted Boone wrote the bestselling novel *Just Me*. 50 million copies to date. *New York Times* bestseller list 26 weeks in a row. Holding steady at #1. I want you all to welcome to the show Ted *Boone*, ladies and gentlemen, Ted Boone!" Wild applause from the studio audience, the house band strikes up a celebratory funk tune — slap bass, jazzy electric guitar squealing, horn section moving in sync. Ted Boone walking out onto the stage, tall and slim, dressed all in black, walks past the house band, wincing at the ugly music. Ted Boone stops and smiles and nods at the audience, bows, puts his hands to his chest, crossing them over his heart — humble — bows again, steps up to greet the host (and Ted Boone's taller, *much*.) He shakes the host's hand, sits

down, picks up the coffeemug, sips it, laughs, smiles, shakes his head, amused at how how far he's gone, how far he's *come*. "Hey, wow, Conan, it's really … *really* great to be here." "It's great to have you. Ted Boone — or should I call you, Red Broon?" Ted Boone laughs with the audience. It's an in-joke. Red Broon — the name of *Just Me*'s protagonist, a thinly-veiled portrait of the young knockabout Ted Boone. Ted Boone shrugs, the audience laughs and begins to chant a catchphrase from the book: "No! One's! Here! But! Me!" louder "No! One's! Here! But! Me!" louder "No! One's! Here! But! Me!" "In all seriousness, Ted Boone, I gotta say, the new book, *wow*." "Thanks, Conan. That means a lot. Thanks." The audience cheers wildly and then begins to stomp its feet, chanting, "Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me!

Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me!

Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me!

Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me!

Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me!

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Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me! Me!
Me! Me! Me!"

MAGGIE AND TYLER

The party is packed by the time Maggie and Tyler get inside. Tyler leading the way, Maggie trailing behind, both hands on the strap of her army bag, shoes buckled securely to her feet. A wall of bodies. People drinking beer at the keg in the kitchen. A line in the hallway to use the bathroom — the carpet wet and squishing under their shoes. In the livingroom Chente's band is halfway through a song. Maggie and Tyler stand at the back wall by the window, watching through the crowd. Chente — balanced atop his bassist's amp, bent over at the waist, playing a jagged, hacking guitar solo, the amp rocking back and forth beneath him, his hair dripping sweat. Kids knock into each other, dancing, pushing. Tyler has his fingers in his ears like a spoiled child and Maggie looks up at him. *Tyler*, she thinks, *no, not here.* She tries to move away from him and throw herself into the crowd and out into the yard, into the world, into life — shoes kicked off forever. Maggie struggling, fighting, but Tyler's pinned her between the wall and his back. He's protecting her from

the crowdcrush, keeping her safe because he loves her more than anything he's ever loved. *Fuck, man*, she thinks.

JOEY

Joey walks up the sidewalk to the house, tequila bottle in a brown paper sack tucked in the crook of his arm. The yard full of people in groups leaning on the picketfence, sprawled out in the grass, standing in halfcircles. Out on the street, kids sit on top of cars, bottles in hand, smoking, talking loud. Someone lights a firecracker and drops it on the sidewalk and it skitters and sparks and spins wild circles — flashing white until it burns out. Joey steps over it and walks into the yard. In the air the smell of gunpowder and cigarette smoke. Joey looking around. Darkness, beer cans, two Mexican girls wrestling in the grass — laughing, punching each other in the side, *thud, thud,* "Ow! Hahaha!" *thud* "Bitch!" *thud, thud.* Joey looks at the ground, his sneakers, pigeontoed. Closing his eyes, fighting to find his bearings. Too many people. Too many strangers. Too much all at

once — fog down the block and the streetlights — yellow, sooty — a bottle breaks — *KRRINKISSSHHHH* — it's someone's birthday, "Oh shit, *cabron*, you should have *said* something! Happy *birth*day!," damp air, a racist joke whispered, a joint passed, "I am *so* drunk! Dude, I am motherfucking drrrunk!," a tooth in the grass that no one sees, a story told about Christmas, a chocolate Frosty from Wendy's, a beautiful girl nauseous because she's sure she's hideous, the thump of a bassline from a car driving by. A girl shrieking "You know *Jason?!* He's, like, one of my best friends in the world!" Dresses, ponytails, a red blouse cut low to show cleavage. Short skirts, jean shorts, a silver ring with a stone the color of green mouthwash. Kids with condoms in backpacks and handbags, cinnamon chewing gum for bad breath, watermelon-strawberry gum blowing bubbles *SNAP!*, a bag of jalapeño flavored pretzel bites, a faded school photo of a dead girl in a wallet, a frosted piece of beach glass for luck, a cumstain on a skirt unnoticed, a beaded bracelet that means everything to two people and two people alone. Joey Carr, stuck in place, watching, listening, glued to the sidewalk, the world swirling all around him and everything

coming in at once. Trampled hedges, someone shouting "Brad! You're here! You made it!," Tic-Tacks rattling in a pocketsize plastic box, hugs, "Wooooooo!," muddy sneakers, a 15 year old girl hyper and frisky after two cups of coffee at Java Joe's, a sixpack of fancy beer hoarded by a fat college student with a bad goatee and genital warts, technical handshakes no one can pull off, someone saying "Todd you're a fucking dick, dude," a 40 of Mickey's turned upside down and drained then tossed in the bushes, "I don't care, I fucking *love* that show. It's *hella* funny," a cellphone ringing, a long story about a wedding, a joke about birth and menstruation, a frown and a shrug for comedy's sake. Haha.

Joey scanning the crowd for familiar faces. Tyler or Chente or Rory. Suzy Dillard? Ted Boone? Nobody. In his head he hears the words of an old movie his uncle loves, *Ever feel like a spaceman in your own backyard? Huh, old boy?* Joey tries to play it cool but he can't hold it together. He lights a cigarette and then drops it on the ground and snubs it out with the sole of his shoe. It's getting late. He shivers — shivers and sets the tequila bottle on the sidewalk and rubs his arms

for warmth. "Look out *pinche guero*," says a thick, short Mexican kid, edging past Joey on the sidewalk. The guy leads his girl up the porchsteps and into the house, opening the door for her, hand on the small of her back. *Huh, old boy?* Joey bends down and picks up the bottle and takes a step and then another — and then he's walking. He stops at the door and he turns the handle and steps inside.

Adam Gnade

HEY HEY LONESOME

A novella

Punch Drunk Press